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Book Reviews

Neil Cohn
THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF COMICS: INTRODUCTION TO THE STRUCTURE AND COGNITION OF SEQUENTIAL IMAGES

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The Visual Language of Comics (Cohn 2013) makes a perfect candidate for a primary textbook on any course which aims at approaching the study of comics from a cognitive perspective. Neil Cohn, the author of a number of influential papers in the field of visual language (e.g. Cohn 2005, 2010, 2012a), has managed to come up with a format which seems to be equally useful to both a layman and a comic scholar. The book walks along Cohn's beaten path of treating structured sequential images as visual language – according to the author's theoretical proposal, drawn structures have the ability to constitute a visual language in a similar way in which structured sequential sounds can become a spoken language, and in which structured hand and body motions can constitute a sign language. Whereas they function within a different modality, visual languages have both *meanings* and *grammars*, and share many features with their verbal and sign counterparts. The elements a visual language is composed of include a graphic structure, morphology, and sequences which are to be decoded, organized by means of a navigational structure which directs us in regard to the beginning of a sequence and its progression. These graphic elements lead us to a conceptual structure, with further possibilities for studying event and narrative structures.

The book is divided into two sections: (1) Structure of Visual Language, consisting of six chapters (1–6), and (2) Visual Language across the World, comprising four chapters (7–9). The first chapter of the book (Introducing Visual Language) addresses the basic notions related to studying visual language – its definition and a brief description of its structure. The second chapter (The Visual Lexicon, Part 1: Visual Morphology) explores elements of visual morphology, defining the notion of a visual lexicon and analyzing both open-class and closed-class lexical items. When it comes to open-class lexical items,

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Cohn sees these as having conventionalized schematic features determined by the author (and perhaps the drawing tradition he or she belongs to) – these schematic representations and patterns are combined into larger novel forms. As far as closed-class lexical items are concerned, Cohn divides them into bound morphemes within the process of visual affixation (i.e. carriers – thought bubbles and speech balloons, indexical lines – path and deictic lines, impact stars and upfixes), umlauts, action stars and fight clouds within the process of suppletion, and aspects involved in the process of reduplication. In the third chapter, dubbed The Visual Lexicon, in Part 2: Panels and Constructions, Cohn deals with the issues of regularity in panels (including suppletive panels, panel-level templates and panels as attention units) and visual language constructions. The fourth chapter (Visual Language Grammar: Narrative Structure), largely influenced by Jackendoff's approach to studying language and other mental faculties (e.g. Jackendoff 1983, 1990, 2002) and theories of story grammars (e.g. Rumelhart 1975; Mandler and Johnson 1977; Thorndyke 1977), provides an account of ideas related to sequential image comprehension, panel transitions, linear coherence relationships, promiscuous transitions and general cognitive scripts and schemas, followed by a proposal of the basic narrative categories, including orienters, establishers, initials, prolongations, peaks and releases. After establishing these categories, which serve as lexical classes/grammatical functions in Visual Narrative Grammar, Cohn moves on to discussing constituent structure in visual narrative and the possibilities in regard to modification. This inspiring chapter is followed by one describing the Navigation of External Compositional Structure. The scope of the chapter comprises the analyses of page layouts, variations, comprehension and constraints related to the notion of external compositional structure, embedding structures, descriptive tree structures and the infinite canvas. Chapter Six, Cognition of Visual Language, is perhaps the most valuable part of the book. Permeated with the empirical data which led to Cohn's remarkable doctoral dissertation (Cohn 2012b), and a range of data coming from other related papers, this chapter pioneers a way into discovering what happens in the human brain in the process of decoding visual language. Starting with various attempts to tackle the cognition of graphic morphology, such as motion lines and carriers, the author goes on to discuss our comprehension of narrative grammar – narrative categories, separation of structure and meaning and constituent structure, all supported by a series of ERP/EEG and fMRI experiments (usually showing results largely comparable to those acquired in similar experiments related to spoken languages).

The second section, Visual Language across the World, primarily explores three different visual languages – the American Visual Language (AVL), the Japanese Visual Language (JVL) and the Central Australian Visual Language (CAVL). For each of them, Cohn provides a description of its graphic structure, morphology and narrative grammar. Each of these three chapters includes at least one section which is not present in the other two – when dealing with AVL, Cohn differentiates between visual languages and dialects, when exploring JVL, he deals with some elements of visual language transmission and contact, whereas the description of CAVL is linked to its cultural role, and to static and dynamic signs and compounds in its lexicon. Through this description, Cohn proves that although these different visual languages are composed of different lexicons and grammars, they share the basic underlying principles rooted in our cognition and therefore transcend culture. Having in mind the title of the book, perhaps the only partially misplaced chapter is the one dealing with the Central Australian Visual Language. Although CAVL is,

indeed, a visual language comprising a fully developed system of sand drawings, its function (both anthropologically and culturally) goes far beyond the context of *comic*s (which the author himself admits). Because of that, this chapter would probably have even greater value as a part of another separate study, or a whole new book. The closing chapter of the second section, and of the whole book, is a perfect example of the academic selflessness of Neil Cohn – not only does he introduce his readers to a whole range of phenomena in the field, he also opens many possibilities for future research. This chapter, The Principle of Equivalence, opens with Cohn's suggestion that we "should expect that the mind/brain treats all expressive capacities in similar ways, given modality-specific constraints" (Cohn 2013:195). This Jackendovian principle is supported with the facts elaborated in the book. After this, Cohn lists possible branches for the further investigation of visual language: conceptual structure and semantics, multimodality, visual language acquisition, linguistic typology, historical linguistics, comparative and contact linguistics, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics and cognitive neuroscience.

On the whole, drawing on contemporary linguistic, psychological and cognitive theories and rich in illustrations and examples, *The Visual Language of Comics* provides a set of more than sufficient guidelines for those wishing to pursue a career in visual linguistics. It is a relatively new field which requires involvement of researchers from all around the world in order to supply enough evidence for further development. Almost every chapter can serve as a stepping stone towards a comprehensive approach that would account for a variety of visual traditions and the underlying cognitive mechanisms.

About the author of the book: Neil Cohn received his Ph.D. degree in Psychology from Tufts University working with Ray Jackendoff, Gina Kuperberg, and Phil Holcomb. He is internationally recognized for his work linking visual and spoken languages in cognition. Currently, he is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Research in Language at UC San Diego. His work can be viewed online at *www.visuallanguagelab.com*.

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